

“Defending and promoting of human rights in the Roma communities”

The local network of human rights monitors by Romani CRISS

In August 2002, for the first time in Romania, at the initiative of an NGO, a monitoring network for promoting human rights, combating of discrimination and abuse and human rights violations in Roma communities was created. The gravity and the multitude of abuses, the discrimination and the violation of human rights which are spread throughout the country, combined with the incapacity of public authorities to respond and to react, to discourage and to punish such behaviour; all these things led to a coagulation of the civic response mechanism for supporting the efforts to build the rule of law. This initiative took the form of network of local human rights monitors.

The initiative of Romani CRISS was supported by Open Society Foundation – Budapest and by the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development¹, through the program “Monitoring Network for combating discrimination against Roma”, which was implemented in the period between July 2002 and October 2003. Following the selection procedure, 10 young people from several counties of Romania were trained in order to operate locally as local monitors of human rights. The first counties that have enabled local monitors were: Satu Mare, Salaj, Cluj, Mures, Botosani, Iasi, Neamt, Galati, Buzau, Dolj, Gorj, Timis, Bucharest, Constanta and Tulcea. In those 10 years were contracted monitors from 31 counties in Romania. Initially, the network of local human rights monitors was formed by local Roma NGOs, later the activists of human rights without affiliation became part of the network. In these 10 years of activity, the network of local human rights monitors represented the core of the actions made by Romani CRISS in the field of promoting the human rights and combating of discrimination.

The network members have contributed significantly and essentially for defending the Roma communities’ interests. They were representing an important role at the local level in the area of supporting the victims of discrimination, abuse and violation of human rights. The idea behind the network was to empower the local civic activists who should lead to improvement of human rights in Roma communities. Over the 10 years, Romani CRISS was working with 58 monitors. They received initial and on-going training in the field of combating the discrimination in general and in specific areas, depending on the nature of human rights breaches, in several periods of the time: discrimination in education, especially in school segregation, discrimination in access to health services, violation of human dignity, access to public places etc. At least once per year, the monitors had the opportunity to

¹ The network of local human rights monitors was financial supported along of 10 years of Open Society Institute activity, Human Rights and Good Governance Program, CCFD Paris - Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour Développement, PHARE Program – the consolidation of civil society in Romania, The German Embassy in Bucharest and Human Rights and Good Governance Program, CCFD Paris - Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour Développement

meet each other and to discuss together with Romani CRISS team about cases which were documented, about their progress and to establish the intervention strategies in the cases.

Regarding the training component, Romani CRISS started in 2007 a dialogue between the local monitors and health mediators, making in this regard a common course in the field of monitoring the situation related to discrimination, abuse in the health area. In addition of initial and on-going trainings, the network was supported through empowering the local organization in which the monitors were working. They were involved in the adjacent actions of the network. Therefore, the monitors were involved in the process of monitoring the Order 1540/19.07.07 against school segregation. Romani CRISS collaborated with monitors' organizations for organizing the events dedicated to International Day of Human Rights, the March of Dignity (2011), etc.

Depending on the projects that have sustained the network activity, there were periods in which the local monitors were involved in monitoring the local media. The monitor who worked in the Bucharest - Ilfov area has been involved in monitoring the national newspapers. The media monitoring was base for drafting reports related to the violation of human rights through the press, but also constituted a way of identifying some specific cases of human dignity violation and not only. These cases were further investigated by Romani CRISS (e.g. Romani CRISS vs. Marius Tuca, Romani CRISS vs. 24 muresean hours, Romani CRISS vs. The Market from A to Z).

Another type of discrimination was documented especially at the beginning of network activities: the access in the public places. The cases were notified by the victims or others to the monitor or directly to the Romani CRISS Staff. Although this seems to be an issue specifically for 2000's, it is still present. Abuses made by law enforcement officials are a type of cases in the network's attention from the beginning. This type of abuse is very common even today. Monitors and Romani CRISS team have been documented 59 cases of police abuse in the past 10 years.

A case identified and documented within the network was the starting point for continued the efforts to combat school segregation; these efforts took 10 years: in 2003, it was documented from Simleul Silvaniei, the Cehei School, being the first case of school segregation documented. Following this episode, as well as other similar cases subsequently documented by Romani CRISS, the Ministry of Education recognized this phenomenon and adopted a notification to prohibit and to combat the school segregation. The efforts of civil society until 2007 received an answer when the Ministry of Education adopted for first time a mandatory legislative document: The Order 1540/19.07.07. From 2007 until today, it have never been exist significant improvements in the field of combating the school segregation; the Order implementation being still ineffective.

Other domains where were manifested discriminatory acts, abuse and violation of human rights documented by the network: the access to housing (inadequate housing conditions, residential segregation, environmental racism, forced evictions); the access to education (refusing the registration for school / kindergarten, school segregation); the access to health services (segregation in the hospitals, the doctors refuse to consult Roma, different treatment for Roma applied by medical staff, medical negligence); the violation of human dignity (public speech, press articles discriminatory, employment

ads, discrimination through statistics); interethnic tensions/conflicts; racially motivated crimes; discrimination in justice administration; violating the right of free movement.

The network of local monitors represented the main element of the Romani CRISS activity which is orientated to human rights defense. Apart from the identification and documentation of the human rights in order to proceed with litigation and juridical assistance actions, Romani CRISS used the situations documented through the human rights monitors for civic and advocacy actions.

Today, to promote human rights and to fight against their violation is more difficult in comparison with some years ago. The Romania's joining to European Union has decreased the interest of Romanian authorities regarding the issue of human rights. The Funders who supported the watchdog activities have retired or reduced their support for civil society in Romania. The structural funds have greatly hampered the dynamics of the organizations implementing such projects.

In this political and administrative framework which is in an on-going degradation, the human rights activists have to continue to fight for the rights of Roma people with human and material resources drastically reduced.